

Residents, study team debate blasting to build freeway

by **Colleen Sparks** - May. 23, 2008 02:11 PM
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Some Ahwatukee Foothills residents are questioning whether descriptions of blasting through South Mountain to build a proposed freeway accurately describe the full effects of the explosions.

Fissures, long-term effects on plant life and how the mountain will degrade over time were some of the concerns residents raised Thursday night. Members of the Arizona Department of Transportation-led freeway study team talked about impacts on the proposed route during a South Mountain Citizens Advisory Team meeting in South Phoenix. The citizens team will eventually recommend whether it thinks the freeway should be built.

The freeway would run along the Pecos Road alignment in Ahwatukee and cut through South Mountain Park. The freeway would then connect to Interstate 10 at 55th Avenue in the West Valley. The freeway would extend through three ridges in South Mountain and require cuts from 120 to 220 feet deep, the study team has said.

The freeway would be designed using "industry-accepted guidelines; therefore no impacts are expected" from the rock excavation in the eastern section of the freeway, a study team report said.

"Rock slope designs would be made to be safe and stable," said Nick LaFronz, HDR Engineering Inc. senior geotechnical engineer. "The potential impacts of the blasting are controlled."

Several studies recorded the geological conditions in the freeway study area, including the types of bedrock, LaFronz said.

Ahwatukee resident Brian Smith, president of the Calabrea HOA board, said that a few months ago the study team had discussed rock degradation over time near another freeway.

"For you to put a statement in here that 'no impacts are expected' is very misleading and irresponsible," Smith said.

LaFronz said the team does "all the due diligence" and "state-of-the-art" technology is used but it can't predict all the exact geological effects over time. He acknowledged that rock slopes could degrade over time.

Tim Tait, an ADOT spokesman and study team member, said State Highway 87 that Smith referenced was damaged because of a landslide, not from blasting through rock.

Michael Goodman, a citizens team member from South Phoenix, questioned whether the blasting could lead to fissures and said the

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presentation was "kind of skimpy."

He said he was concerned about potential impact on South Mountain, homes and plant life. "One thing leads to another," Goodman said.

LaFronz said ground vibration impacts are controlled during blasting and "are usually not felt beyond a couple hundred feet."

Ahwatukee resident Laurel Arndt, a citizens team member, said creating openings in the mountain would change "the integrity of the system" and that the impact study should look beyond just the construction site.

"It's like if you diagnose someone with a heart attack and you say, 'It must have to do with something right on the heart,' " when other parts of the body impact it as well, Arndt said.

Detailed designs of the blasting sites are prepared ahead of time, study team members said.

The study team has been working on an environmental impact statement that will examine the freeway's potential effects on air quality and many other issues. The draft environmental impact statement might be released sometime next year, Tait said.

Ultimately ADOT and the Federal Highway Administration will decide if the freeway should be built and the Maricopa Association of Governments (MAG) will decide if a half-cent sales tax funds it, he said.

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